

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel has an apocalyptic tilt to it that seems to tell of the end of the world. We heard of wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. We might easily relate with that vision as we watch Russia slaughter innocent people in Ukraine, and as we relive our collective trauma during the investigation of the January 6 insurrection. So too, we continue to live with the medical plagues of COVID and RSV along the social plagues of racism and sexism. As inflation grips the globe and once generous donors tighten their pocketbooks, the most vulnerable go hungry and homeless. And, the impacts of climate change caused by wealthy nations have brought destruction on the most vulnerable nations. If I didn't know any better, I'd think we are living in apocalyptic times and the end is near.

Before we get tricked into believing some unhelpful theology about this text, let us remember the context of these statements. Jesus said these statements around the year 30 CE, but Luke wrote this around the year 85 CE. However, the temple was destroyed in year 70 CE, so the author interpreted the temple's destruction through a new lens. And, as Pastor John Petty¹ says, "it would not have taken someone with supernatural predictive abilities to anticipate that the [Judeans] would get trampled in any war with the Romans. The makings of war had been growing for quite a while. The [Judeans] truly did suffer under the Roman yoke, and there were constant rumblings of dissent and, on occasion, outright revolt. When King Herod died (4 [BCE]), there were uprisings all over the country. Roman Legions

¹ https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2010/11/lectionary-blogging-luke-21-5-9.html

from Syria had to be brought down to quell the revolt, and they were not happy when they arrived. When Quirinius instituted his tax census in 6 [CE], again there was resistance. Jesus own ministry rallied the poor and disenfranchised against the 'powers.' Jesus probably could see that war and violence might come, but then so could a lot of people.

The Roman-Jewish War lasted from 66-70 [CE]. In the beginning, the rebellion was widespread. As the Romans brought military pressure to bear in the north, however, the [Judeans] were forced back into "fortress Jerusalem" in 69 [CE].

Within Jerusalem, the [Judean] defenders were divided. In hopes of a ceasefire, some advocated for accommodation [sic.] with the Romans. Some of the more fanatical [Judean] defenders, on the other hand, took an "apocalyptic" view. If they could just hold on awhile longer, they thought, God would intervene and smite the offenders.

These more fanatical defenders gained the upper hand in the city, and some believe they quite likely put pressure on the followers of Jesus, urging them to abandon non-violence and join the struggle against the infidel. Jerusalem put up a stout defense, and the Romans had a hard time subjugating the city. When they did, it wasn't pretty. They destroyed everything they could destroy. Blood ran in the streets.

The destruction of the Temple was utterly devastating for the people. Some traditions associated with the Temple, such as the Sadducees, were destroyed never to rise again[...] Luke asserts, however, that though the nations 'trample' on Jerusalem, at some point this will end."

In today's gospel, remember when Jesus said, "See that you might not be deceived, for many will come upon my name, saying, 'I am' and 'the time has come near.' Do not go after them"? Pastor John Perry says, "This may refer to the aforementioned defenders of Jerusalem in its last days as a city. No doubt there were some self-appointed 'messiahs' floating around. The air seems to have been thick with religious fanaticism, fertile ground for the emergence of messianic figures. For the fanatics, the defense of Jerusalem was a "holy war." Luke has Jesus say, as also in Mark, "Do not go after them." Or, in other words, stay out of holy wars."

Then, what are we to do instead? Well, live like Jesus. That is to not focus on the terror in front of us and behind us, but instead trust in a God who makes all things new. Endure in God's truth. Hang on, things will get better. For while the evil lurks in this world, we have a God who is bringing about a new vision for the world. Death is turned into resurrection. And, while Luke was written for a persecuted and oppressed minority under Roman rule, there's something here we can grasp. It's that reminder that when everything seems to be upended, trust in God and use Jesus as our best model.

Talking about following Jesus's demeanor, one of the first things Jesus did in Luke's gospel is to stand up in the temple and proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoners, and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus testified to God's vision of a world that values radical generosity, that understands serving is the methodology for spiritual development, that seeks out peace and forgiveness, and that works toward truth and transparency. Jesus's ministry has been centered around proclaiming how God works and that God often appears where we least expect.

For those of you in person today, you may have already glanced at an insert in your bulletin. Later in today's service, our congregational vice-president is going to share a bit more about our anticipated financial situation in 2023. It's not dire, but it's not great and it's certainly a change from where we've been for the better part of a decade. We know that economists are sounding the alarm about a likely recession in 2023, that inflation is making everything more expensive, and that interest rates are ballooning. All of this put together, makes it kind of feel like the stones built in this place might come crashing down, that the economic future might be leveled, and that the threats and rumors of catastrophic upheaval are upon us.

Yet, today's gospel reminds us that God's answer is to embody the mentality, the spirituality, and the resilience of Christ. We are called to proclaim God's work among us. So, might our ministry here look a bit different next year? Yes. But is God doing wonderful things through us? Definitely. In an environment where my pastor colleagues are having conversations about X number of years remaining before they deplete their savings, or other colleagues who are preaching their final sermon before their congregation closes, compared to that, we are strong. We have God's presence among us, and to that, Jesus reminds us to testify! That is, to share the good news happening in this place and in our lives. To give thanks for the fact that most of us will have food in our bellies, a roof over our heads, and a spiritual community here that cares for us deeply. To celebrate the gift of TWO baptisms today. To remember the many baptisms, the handful of first communions, and the commitment we have to those on the margins. As a people and as a church, even in tough times, God has provided an abundance.

So, friends, in this Advent season, we wait, we yearn, and we look toward a time when we can fully see the goodness of God no matter what is happening. Today,

God reminds us that we are a people who are shaped by Christ Jesus and who are invited to endure in hope. Not the kind of hope that asks for that Powerball Jackpot last week, but rather a hope that has clear assurance. It's a clarity that God has always provided. The reminder that we are God's children. A message that says, do not let what is before you destroy who you are and whose you are, rather, remember that we are made one in Christ and that Christ is within you. Testify. Endure. Remember. God is with us. Amen